Imamah and Wilayah: Allamah Sharaf Al-Din's Approach to Conciliation

Muhammad Ishaq Dhakiri

Al-Islam.org

Al-Taqrib number-5-november-2009

Authors(s):

Muhammad Ishaq Dhakiri [3]

Publisher(s):

Al-Taqrib [4]

Category:

Sunni & Shi'a [5]

Journal:

number-5-november-2009 [6]

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din firmly believed in the principle of the unity of the Islamic Ummah as well as the principle of Imamah in the Islamic faith. It is precisely because of this that his conciliatory activities began first with establishing the fact that between these two Islamic principles there is no contradiction or discrepancy; the book, Al-Muraja'at, can be counted as a practical workshop for efforts towards reconciliation from a number of perspectives; scientific, ethical, methodological, etc., which is based on the search for truth.

This text explores the method that Allamah Sharaf Al-Din applied in order to promote unity without denying the core of Shia beliefs and replying to misconceptions about them.

Featured Category:

Introducing the Ahlul Bayt [7]
Resources for Further Research [8]
Responses to Misconceptions [9]
Shi'a beliefs explained [10]
Unity between Shi'a & Sunni [11]

Topic Tags:

Wilayah [12]
Imamah [13]
Islamic Unity [14]

Person Tags:

Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din al-Musawi [15]

Al-Taqrib A Journal of Islamic Unity Number 5 November 2009
Muhammad Ishaq Dhakiri

This is an abridged version of a much lengthier article by the author entitled "Imamat Wa Wilayat Dar nazariyyeh-Ye Taqrib-e Madhahib-e Islami-Ye Allamah Sharaf Al-Din Amuli."

Abstract

The concepts of Imamah and 'the caliphate' are important features of Islam and each school of thought within Islam has developed its own understanding of these particular terms. The present article begins by reviewing and analyzing the different conceptualizations of Imamah. The author then surveys the different approaches adopted by conciliatory scholars in dealing with the concepts of Imamah and the caliphate.

Some of these approaches involve abstaining from the debate, separating the concept of Imamah from the caliphate, and engaging in inter-confessional discussion in order to diffuse popular misunderstandings that adherents of each Madhhab have in relation to the other Madhahib through a more accurate portrayal of their core beliefs. Allamah Sharaf Al-Din adopted this last approach of academic debate and discussion and this is examined in the final section of the paper. His efforts paved the way for the Shia school of jurisprudence to be recognized as a bona fide Madhhab by the leading authorities of Al-Azhar in Egypt.

Keywords: Sharaf Al-Din, Al-Bashari, Imamah, Wilayah, the caliphate, unity, conciliatory approach, Ahl Al-Bayt, Shia, Ahl Al-Sunnah.

Introduction

The issue of Imamah and the caliphate (Khilafah) in Islam has been one of the most important and influential topics pertaining to Muslim society, and many Muslim scholar has theorized on this topic from a variety of perspectives. One of the important approaches which is brought up in the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Islamic society, and one which has a special importance given the contemporary conditions of the Muslim world, is the approach of conciliation.

After all, the most important issue which initially gave rise to the different Islamic schools of thought, according to the views of the majority of scholars on Islamic cultures, creeds, and history as well as other scholars, has been the diversity of opinion regarding the issue of religious and political leadership of the Islamic society. On this matter, Shahristani has said that throughout the history of Islam, Muslims

have not drawn their swords against each other due to a religious issue as they have with regard to the issue of the guidance and leadership of Muslim society.1

Allamah Abd Al-Husayn Sharaf Al-Din Amuli, a personality who was deeply committed to the unity of the Islamic Ummah and the reconciliation between the Islamic schools of thought, has remarked in this matter: "Politics has divided the two; therefore, politics must unite the two." Put differently, the topic of caliphate and the result of politics has divided the Islamic Ummah into two groups, the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah, and therefore, it is politics and the political interests of the Islamic world that must now bring the two together.

Considering the importance of the issue of leadership and the caliphate, both in Islamic theology as well as in the matter of conciliating the Islamic schools of thought, it seems imperative for the topic of this discussion to be clearly articulated and defined. What aspects pertaining to leadership of an Islamic society are in question and in what manner can leadership and Islamic society be detached?

What aspects and facets can be proposed regarding the similarities and differences of the two great Islamic groups, the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah, pertaining to this matter? Finally, is there a difference between the terms Imamah and Khilafah?

We will begin with a brief discussion and examination of the above-mentioned issues. Subsequently, the views and perspectives regarding the issues of the caliphate and Imamah proposed by scholars who are involved in conciliating the Islamic schools of thought, particularly from the Shia school of thought, will be briefly examined. Finally, the conciliatory views of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din regarding the issue of the caliphate and Imamah of Islamic society will be alluded to.

Etymology of the Term 'Imam'

The term Imam is normally translated as leader or ruler. Leadership, on its own, does not carry a positive or negative connotation; being a leader can be actualized in a true and divine way, in which case such a leadership brings about value and sanctity; however, being a leader can also be actualized in an incorrect and misguided way, in which case it takes on a negative meaning.

In the noble Qur'an, the term Imam has been used with both connotations. In one case, the noble Qur'an states:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ ۖ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ

We made them Imams, guiding by Our command. (***21:73***)

And in other case, it states:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ ۖ وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا يُنْصَرُونَ

We made them Imams who invite to the Fire, and on the Day of Resurrection they will not receive any help. (***28:41***)

Therefore, Imamah means to lead and direct people. The question that we must turn to now is this: what are the aspects of this leadership?

The Role of Imamah according to the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah

Imamah, in the sense of religious and political guardianship (Wilayah) of the twelve Imams (a.s.), is a pivotal cornerstone of the Shia school of thought, the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.). According to the Shia, Imamah is a part of the Usul Al-Din (fundamental principles of faith); however, the Sunnis, though they believe in a certain type of Imamah, nevertheless, place it as part of the Furu Al-Din (subsidiary aspects of religion) and not the Usul. Shahid Mutahhari, in clarifying this issue as to why Imamah is a part of the Usul Al-Din according to the Shia and a part of the Furu Al-Din according to the Ahl Al-Sunnah, states, "The reason behind the difference in this issue is unknown as to why the concept of Imamah according to the Shia is different than that which one finds with the Ahl Al-Sunnah."2

The Aspects and Facets of Imamah according to the Shia

In order to attain a clear and precise concept of Imamah, an accurate analysis and interpretation of this concept according to the Shia beliefs is fundamental in the discussion on conciliating the Islamic schools of thought. This also includes an investigation and discussion regarding the following questions: What are the aspects and facets of Imamah according to the Shia school of thought? In which of these aspects are there similarities and differences between their view and that of the Ahl Al-Sunnah? It is only with a careful exposition of this subject-matter that one can engage in the discussion, investigation, and evaluation of the opinions pertaining to the conciliation that has been proposed by Shia scholars on the issue of Imamah.

1. Imamah in the sense of governing over the public and leading the Muslims

One of the meanings and aspects that has been put forward by the Shia regarding the term Imamah is based on the idea of leading the Muslim society. This is conceptualized in the same manner where the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.w.) of Islam had, in his lifetime, the responsibility of governing the Muslim society.

After the demise of the holy Prophet (s.a.w.w.) of Islam, however, while the majority of Islamic groups and schools of thought were unanimous on the issue of Muslim society requiring a leader and head (and Imamah in this sense and with this definition is agreed upon by the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah), there arose a difference of opinion between the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah regarding the issue of who this right and responsibility would fall on, how it would be solemnized, and in what manner it would be transferred.

The Shia school of thought is of the belief that the selection and incumbency of the Caliph and Imam is from the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.w.) of Islam. For this reason, they are of the view that based on the statements transmitted from the Prophet (s.a.w.w.), this right had been passed on to Imam 'Ali (a.s.) and to the other immaculate Imams. From this perspective, the 'filling in' of other individuals of the seat and position of the caliphate of the Islamic Ummah has been unjust.

However, the Ahl Al-Sunnah are of the belief that the selection and appointment of the caliph was not of the responsibilities of the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w.); rather, the choice of determining the caliph of Islam was entrusted to the Islamic Ummah, and the Islamic Ummah chose for the caliphate, initially through consultation, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali (a.s.) respectively.

Critique and analysis regarding this aspect of Imamah

As has been stated, the principle of Imamah, in the sense of governing the public and leading the Islamic society, is agreed upon by both the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah though there is a difference of opinion regarding the choice of leader and the method used to determine this choice.

The question is: is this the only meaning and aspect of Imamah that has been presented? If so, then it appears that eliminating the differences between the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah on this topic is possible. According to the statement of Shahid Mutahhari, Imamah with this meaning is better situated within the Furu' Al-Din and not the Usul Al-din; he states:

If the issue of Imamah is confined to this, i.e., it is only a matter of the political leadership of Muslims after the Prophet (s.a.w.w.), then surely, we who are Shias, would have considered Imamah as part of the Furu' Al-Din and not the Usul Al-din; we would have said that this is a side issue like the canonical prayers.

However, the Shia, who are of the belief in the cornerstone of Imamah, do not limit it to this by saying that 'Ali was one of the companions of the Prophet and Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and a hundred other individuals were also companions of the Prophet; that 'Ali was better, superior, more knowledgeable, more God-conscious and further ahead than them; and that the Prophet had appointed him.

No, the Shia do not believe in limiting it to this; rather, they add two other issues, neither of which, in principle, the Ahl Al-Tassanun (i.e. Sunnis) subscribe to (i.e., it is not that they subscribe to these beliefs but feel that 'Ali was lacking in them). One of them is the issue of Imamah in the sense of religious

authority.3

2. Imamah in the sense of religious and intellectual authority

One of the other duties of the Imam that the Shia school of thought subscribes to is his religious authority. In elaborating on this concept, the following question has been asked: are all the rules and teachings of the religion of Islam enumerated in what has been revealed in the Qur'an and what the Prophet of Islam has preached for the Muslims during his lifetime? In other words, is it the case that everything that Islam has wanted to relate regarding its religious rules and teachings the same as that which appears in the Qur'an or that which the Prophet of Islam himself related to the public?

Or, is it more likely the case that what the Prophet of Islam made known to the public in the short lifetime that remained after the beginning of his prophetic mission was not all the teachings of Islam, particularly considering the issues he had to deal with and the various battles that he had with the unbelievers and the Jews?

Of course, this is not to imply that Islam was presented to the Prophet of Islam by God in an incomplete manner; rather, the conviction of the Shias is that first of all, God did not reveal the teachings of Islam to the Prophet in a partial form nor did the Prophet of Islam relate only a part of those teachings to the people.

Second, the teachings of Islam have only been revealed to the noble Prophet and he is the only one who has brought Islam (as a complete religion) to mankind. Moreover, God had revealed to the Prophet of Islam that which needed to be revealed of Islam and certainly, other than the Prophet of Islam, no other personality had received this revelation.

In conclusion, our claim is not that a portion of the rules and teachings of Islam was left unrevealed to the Prophet; rather, our claim is in this point: Were there any rules and teachings of Islam which were left untransmitted to the public? The view of the Shias is that, considering the limited time that the Prophet of Islam had at his disposal on the one hand, and considering the fact that many of the rules and obligations of Islam during the time of the Prophet were not even up for discussion on the other, the Prophet (s.a.w.w.) simply did not have this opportunity.

That which he imparted to the public was not the entirety of the Islamic teachings. Hence, the noble Prophet of Islam taught all the rules and teachings of Islam, at least in terms of their essentials, to 'Ali (a.s.), his successor and the caliph after himself.

Further, the Prophet introduced 'Ali to the people as one of the exceptional scholars and competent authorities, one who was protected from making mistakes and errors and who was acquainted with all the particularities of the religion of Islam. The Prophet, moreover, stated that after himself people should ask his successor whatever they wished regarding any religious matters.

Shahid Mutahhari, in expounding this aspect of Imamah, has stated: In reality, Imamah in this case is a type of authority of Islam, an authority much higher than that of a jurisprudent: an authority from Allah. (The Imams) are those that are true Islamicists, but not Islamicists who have understood Islam based on their own rationality and logic (which would undoubtedly make them fallible); rather these are individuals who have received the teachings of Islam from the Prophet through a secret and hidden medium (one which is veiled from us).4

However, the Ahl Al-Sunnah are of the belief that the Prophet of Islam had transmitted the entire corpus of the Islamic rules and rituals as well as its religious teachings to all the companions and people. Further, the entirety of the Islamic teachings was that which the Prophet (s.a.w.w.) had narrated to all the companions.

For this reason, the Ahl Al-Sunnah do not subscribe to the view that the rank and position of the one succeeding the noble Prophet of Islam is one of religious and intellectual authority, one from whom Muslims may derive the particularities of their duties and who are infallible and immune from making errors. It is not that they believe in such a position after the Prophet of Islam but are in disagreement with the Shia school of thought regarding the person who is to occupy such a position (rather, they do not believe in there being such a position to begin with).

As a result of this, according to the Ahl Al-Sunnah, the standard of religious rulings and Islamic teachings in an age after the demise of the Prophet of Islam, is the literal noble Qur'an and the narrations of the Prophet of Islam which have been transmitted through the companions.

If a situation arises where their scholars cannot derive a divine ruling from the Qur'an or if the ruling of that issue has not appeared in the prophetic narrations, then the means used to acquire the rulings of such issues are Qiyas (analogical reasoning) and the Ijtihadat (independent judgements) of the companions and the religious authorities. This is despite the fact that such Ijtihadat are not immune from error; it is possible that the scholars are correct (in their rulings) in which case they are rewarded for it or that they make an error in which case they are excused for it.5

Allamah Tabataba'i, in explaining this issue, has stated: A short while after assuming the caliphate, the first caliph addressed the people from on top of the Prophet's pulpit and announced the way and method of his own rulership.

He said, 'The noble messenger in his own way was assisted by God and was supported by divine revelation; however, since we are not as fortunate to receive revelation, we will proceed in managing the affairs of the Muslims through Ijtihad. It may be, through the assistance of God, that our conclusions are accurate, but it is also possible that we make mistakes.6

Likewise, Shahid Mutahhari, in elaborating the view of the Ahl Al-Sunnah regarding this aspect of Imamah (the aspect of the Imam being the religious and intellectual authority), has stated: The claim of the Ahl Al-Tasannun is that whatever the teachings of Islam were, they were no different than what the

Prophet expounded for his companions. However, in issues where nothing has been narrated from the companions, they are at a loss at what to do. It is here that the concept of Qiyas enters the scene and they say, 'we will complete (those issues where no narration appears) with the law of Qiyas and comparison.' Of course, the leader of the faithful (a.s.), in the Nahj Al-Balaghah, has critiqued (this Qiyasi form) and in his response to them, has said, 'does that mean that God has sent an incomplete religion that you need to come (with Qiyas) to complete it?'7

Analysis and critique of this aspect of Imamah

This form of Imamah is counted as one of the distinguishing features and characteristics of the Shia school of thought. The understanding of Imamah as a rank and position in which the Imams (a.s.), after the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w.), had completed religious and intellectual authority within Islamic society in such a way that they were immune from making errors and their obedience was mandatory on all Muslims is only found within the Shia school of thought. The Ahl Al-Sunnah in no way subscribe to such a position, not only regarding the Shia infallible Imams, but also regarding the caliphs and religious authorities of their own.

It is true that the Ahl Al-Sunnah agree to one aspect of this understanding (of Imamah), the intellectual position of the Shia Imams, as many of the authorities within the Ahl Al-Sunnah admit and acknowledge the intellectual grace, understanding, and superiority of the infallible Imams and the noble Household of Islam.

However, this view of theirs does not at all corroborate the intellectual and religious rank and position that the Shias attribute to their own Imams; rather, the Ahl Al-Sunnah place this intellectual position and religious authority of the Imams and the Prophet's Household on the same plane and level as their own religious scholars and predecessors who, as admitted by the Ahl Al-Sunnah themselves, are not immune from error.

3. Imamah in the sense of Wilayah: the Perfect Man and the Proof of the Age

One of the other meanings for Imamah, as found in the Shia school of thought, involves the 'Perfect Man' (Insan Al-Kamil) and 'Proof of God' (Hujjat Allah). The idea is that in every age there exists one perfect human who is the bearer of humanity's universal spirituality, who is counted as God's vicegerent on earth, and who carries all the perfected qualities of humanity. This Perfect Man is considered the Proof of God and the Proof of the Age and the phrase *Wa Law La Al-Hujjah Lasakhat Al-Ardh Bi Ahliha* ("Were it not for the Hujjah, surely the earth would sink with its inhabitants") alludes to this fact that the earth has never been and never will be deprived of the Perfect Man.

This Proof of God has ranks and distinctions that are unfathomable by us, one of which is having Wilayah over all phenomena, i.e., being the Wali of God and Proof of God in respect to all things. Another distinction of the Perfect Man is the fact that he is the intermediary of divine grace and mercy.

Moreover, the Imam and Wali of God is the intermediary of divine guidance among human beings and, according to the idea of 'the awaited Imam' and the concept of the Mahdi, he is inseparably linked to this world.8

Allamah Tabatabai, in speaking to Henry Corbin, has recounted the following from him regarding this aspect of Imamah: Dr. Corbin then added: 'it seems to me that the Shia school of thought is the only school which has preserved the divine relationship between God and creation forever, and it has established and revived the concept of Wilayah in a continuous and uninterrupted manner. The Jewish faith terminated prophecy, which, in reality, is the link between God and the world of man, with the Kalim (i.e., Moses) and has not admitted to the prophecy of Jesus or Muhammad after that and hence has broken the above link.

Similarly, the Christians have stopped at Jesus and among the Muslims, the Ahl Al-Sunnah have likewise stopped at Muhammad (s.a.w.w.), and with the ending of prophecy amongst them, the link between the Creator and creation no longer exists. It is only the Shia school of thought that accepts the seal of prophecy with Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w.) but considers Wilayah, which is none other than the relation of guidance and perfection, as a living reality that has continued after the Prophet and will do so forever.'9

Analysis and critique of Imamah in the sense of the Wali of God and the Perfect Man

Imamah in this sense and with this understanding is again one of the distinctions of the Shia school of thought. The Ahl Al-Sunnah do not believe in such a position, either for the Shia Imams or for anyone else. However, the mystics and Sufis from amongst the Ahl Al-Sunnah do subscribe to a version of this belief, and that is that in every age there exists a Wali of God and the Perfect Man who, at times, is referred to as the Pole (Qutb). Almost all of them trace the spiritual lineages of their Poles to 'Ali (a.s.). However, firstly, even the Sufis have taken this doctrine of theirs from the Shia school; and secondly, their understanding of the Pole and the Perfect Man, as well as the particularities regarding this station, is different than the understanding the Shias have regarding the Wali of God and the Perfect Man.

In conclusion, the doctrine of Imamah that one finds within the Shia school of thought is composed of many aspects. The evidence for these aspects as well as the (various) meanings of Imamah requires another venue altogether as there are many scholars who have offered evidence for them. Shahid Mutahhari has said the following regarding this:

The issue of Imamah (amongst the Shias) exists at three levels, and if these are not distinguished from one another, we will inevitably fall into error regarding the evidence that has been offered for them. Hence, even Shi'ism has degrees. Some Shias are only of the belief that Imamah involves social leadership and that the Prophet (s.a.w.w.) appointed Ali (a.s.) as the leader after himself. These people are only Shias to this extent and with regard to the other two issues, either they do not believe in them or they remain silent. Some others also subscribe to the second understanding but stop short of the third

level. However, most Shias as well as the Shia scholars also believe in the third level.[10]

Another point which is important in the discussion on Imamah is the fact that just as distinguishing between the aspects of Imamah has an effect on the very evidence of Imamah and its forms, so too does it play an important role in the discussion on bringing the different schools of thought together and the scholarly views that have been offered, with the aim of conciliating the Islamic schools of thought, regarding Imamah and the caliphate in Islam.

The correct understanding and exposition of the idea of Imamah within the Shia school of thought as well as distinguishing the nuances and forms which have been offered regarding it are beneficial to an analysis, critique and, evaluation of the conciliatory views, approaches, and solutions that have been presented by Shia conciliatory scholars on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate. As to which of the previously discussed conciliatory approaches is more beneficial in this discussion is what will now be investigated.

Study and Analysis of the Conciliatory Perspectives and Approaches on the Topic of Imamah

1. The perspective/approach of silence vis-à-vis the topic of Imamah and the caliphate

One of the solutions of reconciliation which is presented by some of the conciliatory scholars on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Muslim society is the approach of silence and refraining from entering into any discussion on the Imamah and caliphate of the early Islamic society, particularly in this day and age. The conciliatory theorists who follow this approach have defended their views with the following explanation: The topic of the caliphate and Imamah at the advent of Islam and the inception of the first Muslim community is a topic relevant only to that age. The question is: who had a greater right to sit on the throne of the Islamic caliphate and what related events transpired during that time? This is a topic relevant only to that period and has no relation to the present situation of the Muslims.

Reviving this discussion has no benefit for the Muslim community today. In this manner, the best and most useful way to reduce religious tensions and antagonisms between the Muslims on the issue of the caliphate of Islamic society, and, occasionally, on some other issues, is to suspend discussion on this topic. Moreover, in today's age, each of the Islamic countries has their own particular mechanism through which the political administration of their country operates and to which they are bound. They consider such mechanisms beneficial for the course of their own country and do not feel the need to discuss the issue of Imamah and the caliphate of Muslim society.

Analysis and critique of this perspective and approach

The perspective of suspending discussion on the topic of the caliphate of the first Islamic society

appears to be beneficial according to the perspective of the Ahl Al-Sunnah who limit the Imamah of Islamic society to political and social leadership and the preservation and execution of rules in a Muslim society. The argument is that after the Imamah of the first Islamic society, the issue took on a historical aspect, and therefore its study and analysis is only useful to that extent and no more. Further, within this domain, one cannot deny the caliphate of the Caliphs.

Essentially, however, if the topic of Imamah is confined to this meaning, not only in this day and age, but also during the early days of Islam, it should not have caused the deep divisions amongst Muslims. As stated by Shahid Mutahhari, if the topic of Imamah was limited to who should have sat on the throne of caliphate after the demise of the Prophet of Islam, then it would be better for the Shias to have relegated it, like the Ahl Al-Sunnah, to the Furu' Al-Din and not to the Usul Al-din.[11]

However, as discussed previously, the topic of Imamah according to the Shia school of thought contains numerous facets, only one of which is the issue of political and social caliphate and the rule over the Islamic society; the other facets include religious and intellectual authority of the Imams (a.s.) as particularly understood by Shia authorities, as well as the existential and legislative Wilayah of the Imams over all creatures. The fact is that the elders and scholars of the Shia school of thought see the essence of Shi'ism and Shias reflected in the mirror of Imamah and its facets.

Moreover, they do not consider it possible to define the essence of the Shias without explaining their relation with the issue of Imamah. For this reason, they do not consider the deviation of the first Islamic society on the issue of Imamah and the caliphate to be one limited to the political or social dimension or the execution of Islamic rule. Rather, according to great religious scholars such as Imam Khumayni (r.a.) and Ayatollah Burujardi (r.a.), the deviation of the first Islamic society on the issue of Imamah resulted in the Islamic Ummah being deprived of many of the religious rulings and Islamic teachings.[12]

Now, considering the points alluded to, it seems that the perspective of avoiding discussion on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Islamic society in order to achieve the goals of reconciliation is not an appropriate perspective. This is because if Imamah according to the Shias was, like the view of the Ahl Al-Sunnah, limited to the dimension of political and social rule, then avoiding discussion and even accepting the caliphate of the first caliphs may have been useful in promoting the goals of reconciliation. Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, in his response to Shaykh Nuhi Hanafi who had accused the Shias of not accepting the caliphate of the Caliphs, goes on to accept their caliphate, i.e., that it did take place in history. Certainly, having discussions and debates on only this dimension of Imamah has no benefit whatsoever for today's Islamic society.[13]

However, considering the fact that Imamah within the Shia school of thought has a particular meaning and a number of facets of it have been presented, it seems that the approach of refraining from discussion on the topic of Imamah, which is intimately linked with the essence of Shi'ism, is not the appropriate approach to adopt. On the contrary, the religious and intellectual duty of the Shia conciliatory scholars demands that they have scholarly and well-documented discussions as well as 'goodly'

exchanges with the Ahl Al-Sunnah scholars such that through such dealings, they may be able to come to a mutual understanding on this topic, or at the very least, they can clearly present the viewpoint of the Shia school of thought regarding the topic of Imamah.

This is precisely the approach adopted by Allamah Sharaf Al-Din approximately a century ago, a communicative approach of dialogue, in order to authenticate, in an intellectual manner, the fundamental beliefs of the Shias to the leading figures of the Ahl Al-Sunnah. In fact, this was during a time when the Shias were under severe social, intellectual, and denominational strain and were the target of various verdicts labelling them as unbelievers. This approach of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din will be discussed and analyzed later.

2. The conciliatory approach and perspective of separating Imamah from the caliphate

According to this perspective, Imamah has been defined in terms of an intellectual and religious authority while the caliphate has been defined in terms of political, social, and executive rule within the Islamic society. It is on this basis that the promoters of this perspective, in order to pursue their conciliatory goals, are of the belief that these two topics had been separated during the early days of Islam, and now too, in order to achieve a reconciliation of the schools of thought, we must continue to affirm their separation (in principle).

This means that regarding the topic of the caliphate, the Shias should consider the caliphate of the first caliphs as legitimate and in return, the Ahl Al-Sunnah should accept the intellectual and religious authority of the Imams (a.s.). Of course, the Ahl Al-Sunnah do accept this matter for they do not deny the knowledge and nobility of the Imams (a.s.). On this issue, the view of the late Allamah Samanani has been presented as such:

The demised Allamah Samanani, in the journal Risalah Al-Islam used to say: 'The issue of Imamah and caliphate is essentially two issues. The Caliphs accepted the Imamah of 'Ali (a.s.) and 'Ali also accepted their caliphate. However, he said to them, "You administer but let me handle the difficulties." They accepted this.'14

The conciliatory view of these scholars is established on this basis that the position of Imamah, which the Shias attribute to the infallible Imams, is not inconsistent with the position of the caliphate, which the Ahl Al-Sunnah attribute to the caliphs. On the contrary, they have always been compatible and in agreement.

Imamah, according to the Shias, is conditional on infallibility and the appointment from God and the Prophet, and this position was never assumed or rejected by the rightly-guided caliphs; moreover, the position of Imamah, according to the Shias, is not conditional on assuming the position of the external caliphate and ruling the Islamic society. In contrast, the caliphate of the rightly-guided caliphs is another

position altogether which our infallible Imam (a.s.), during his 25 years, neither denied nor annulled. It is for this reason that Imamah, in the Shia dictionary, has not had any opposition or intolerance to caliphate and in substantiating caliphate there is no need to deny Imamah.15

Analysis and critique of the perspective of separation (of Imamah and caliphate) in the topic of Imamah

1. First critique

The proponents of this perspective have ignored the first aspect of Imamah, the aspect of political rule, that exists within the Shia school of thought and which is also underscored by Shia scholars and leading figures. In other words, the proponents of this perspective have separated this aspect of Imamah from the essence of Imamah itself, and under the heading of caliphate, have endowed it to others. This is despite the fact that one of the aspects which is agreed upon in the discussion of Imamah is the aspect of the political, social, and executive rule of the Imams which was transferred to them from the noble Prophet of Islam even though it may not have been actualized. Further discussion on this would require another opportunity.

2. Second critique

The proponents of the perspective of separation (of Imamah and caliphate) are of the belief and opinion that the Ahl Al-Sunnah, and at their head, the rightly-guided caliphs, have accepted the Imamah of the Imams (a.s.), and by this they mean the aspect of intellectual and religious authority of the infallible Imams as stipulated within the Shia school of thought, and in return, the Shia Imams, and at their head, Imam 'Ali (a.s.), had accepted and legitimized the caliphate of the three caliphs. However, this topic and this point are at the essence of the controversy between the Shia and the Ahl Al-Sunnah and hence, begs the question so to speak.

3. Third critique

Thirdly, the perspective of separation (of Imamah and the caliphate) is in opposition to the religious basis for political reign. This is because according to the religious sources of the Shia school of thought, the foundational grounds for legitimizing politics is based on the true dominion of God over all things and his existential and legislative lordship over everything other than Himself. No individual, without the permission of God, can rule over another.16

Based on this, the essential view on the legitimization of political rule after the Prophet of Islam returns to its axis (the Imamah of the infallible Imams) in the sense that that Shia school of thought acknowledges the religious texts regarding the appointment of the Prophet's successor. Having accepted the appointment of the infallible Imams as the governors of Islamic society, they consider the legitimization of their political governance arising from Divine Will.

However, the perspective of separation (of Imamah and the caliphate), which considers others legitimate in the rule of the caliphate and the political governance of the Islamic society, assumes the perspective of the separation of religion and politics and accepts the basis of democracy in the area of political governance where the legitimization of political rule emerges from the will of the people; such a basis is not justifiable.

3. Perspective and approach of academic debate and discussion regarding the topic of Imamah

The third approach which can be investigated and which is adopted by conciliatory thinkers on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate is the approach of academic discussion on this topic amongst the scholars of the different schools. This approach allows for each of the two sides to present a documented and scholarly elaboration of their beliefs on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate, which can then either result in the acceptance of one of the sides regarding the proofs offered by the other, or at the least, it can make both sides involved in the debate and discussion to be aware of their opponent's beliefs and the grounds for their support. In either case, the conciliatory goals will have been accomplished to a reasonable extent.

Analysis and critique of this approach

It seems that the approach of a well-documented academic exchange in the discussion of Imamah and the caliphate of Muslim society is one of the best methods on this subject in order to reach the goals of conciliation. This is because the topic of Imamah is one of the pillars and foundations of the Shia school of thought and moreover that the issue of Imamah is linked and tied to the history and essence of the Shia school in such a way that presenting an accurate, acceptable, and clear picture of Shi'ism is not possible without elaborating on its essential principles such as the discussion on Imamah itself.

If Shia conciliatory scholars would like to introduce the Shia school of thought as one of the orthodox schools in the Islamic world while, at the same time, pursue their goals in bringing the Islamic schools of thought together, then the most appropriate approach regarding the topic of Imamah and the caliphate is scholarly discourse. Through it they may be able to both defend the legitimacy of the Shia school of thought as well as adjust and correct the view of the opposing side regarding Shi'ism.

From the discussion and study of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, it becomes clear that the approach which he considered the most appropriate in uniting the Muslims and conciliating the Islamic schools of thought, at least in the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Islamic society, was the approach of scholarly discourse and dialogue. Moreover, it seems that Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, in his academic discussions and conversations with scholars of other Islamic schools of thought, was successful in advancing his goals of conciliation.

If this was not the case then his expositions and intellectual-demonstrative defense of the Shia school of

thought, of both its essential components as well as its auxiliary ones, which he presented to the leading scholars of Al-Azhar in Egypt in his various discussions and conversations with them (as well as similar efforts by Allamah Qummi) would certainly not have paved the way for the formation of the Dar Al-Taqrib Al-Madhahib Al-Islami (the House of Conciliating the Islamic schools of thought) in Egypt.

Moreover, it would not have resulted in the verdict of the grand Mufti of the Ahl Al-Sunnah in officializing the jurisprudence of the Shia school of thought alongside the other schools.17 For this reason, it is necessary to analyze, evaluate, and take lesson from his conciliatory perspective on the topic of Imamah as well as other related topics in order to fulfil the goals of conciliation.

The Conciliatory Perspective of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din on the Topic of Imamah

According to Sharaf Al-Din, the fundamental causes for discord and division amongst the Muslims and the followers of the Islamic schools could be traced to an inaccurate and insufficient understanding of Muslims regarding the religious and denominational beliefs of the other schools. On this note, professor Subhani has said:

One of the important contributions left by Allamah Sharaf Al-Din and one of the important avenues that he opened, not only for the Shias but for the Islamic world, was in his explanation that the division, separation, and mutual animosity between Muslims was due to the fact that the two sides did not understand one another: the Shias lack awareness regarding the Sunnis and the Sunnis are uninformed regarding the Shias. Hence, if they learn from one another, engage in conversation, and accurately present themselves to each other, the truth will become clear and the differences will vanish.18

Moreover, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, apart from his efforts in uniting the Muslims and reconciling the Islamic schools, was concerned with defending the school of thought of the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.) and portraying an accurate picture of both the Usul Al-Din and the Furu' Al-Din of this school, particularly on the topic of the caliphate and Imamah. In this regards, the following has been said:

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din was the symbol of the successful amalgamation of defending the school of thought of the Ahl Al-Bayt (on the one hand) and guarding the unity and proximity of the Islamic schools of thought (on the other). He did not consider the idea of conciliation to mean retreating from one's intellectual and doctrinal positions or to disregard ideological preferences and he did not find himself engulfed by the whirlpool of society.

Yet with all this, he was not of those who would live through history and consider attacking the caliphate as the fundamental task-at-hand or to take the Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'ah as the direct heirs of those who usurped the position of Imamah and hence issue death verdicts with reproach and rancor! Allamah Sharaf Al-Din lived at the peak of moderation.

He showed that the open-minded was the wise one who defends his beliefs and intellectual foundations without resorting to flattery or compromise. Nevertheless, with all this, he demonstrated that speaking

candidly is not to be taken as stubbornness and disclosing one's beliefs and revealing one's position necessitates professional conduct for those who are learned.19

In this manner, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din considered the approach of exposition and scholarly argumentation by way of dialogue and discourse of the parties involved as the best approach to follow regarding the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Islamic society. Through it one would be able to achieve two things:

1. To present a scholarly and accurate portrayal of the axioms of the Shia school of thought and to defend these doctrinal axioms associated with the school.

2. Through the scholarly exchange of ideas, after having gained a more favorable impression from the scholars and followers of the other Islamic schools towards the doctrinal school of the Shias, it would result in their having an accurate and positive view towards the Shias. Through this way, they will have achieved the goals of conciliation.

In the past and present, as much as there have been and still are intra-denominational dialogues on controversial topics amongst the scholars of the Islamic schools of thought, nevertheless, it seems that his (i.e., Allamah's) approach of dialogue is endowed with certain merits that distinguish both the essence of his approach as well as its theoretical and practical effects from other approaches of dialogue. A few of these merits will be alluded to later.

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din has authored numerous books and articles on the topic of Imamah of Muslim society. Further, in other works of his, he has implicitly presented arguments to establish the Imamah and successorship of Imam 'Ali and the other Imams. The writings and books that Allamah Sharaf Al-Din has authored on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Muslim society include the following:

Sabil Al-Mu'minin Fi Ithbat Imamat Al-Din (The Path of the Believer in Establishing Imamah in Religion): This book was composed in three volumes on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Islamic society and includes intellectual and textual (Naqli) arguments for proving the Imamah of the infallible Imams (a.s.), the virtues and tradition of the Imams, and political philosophy in Islam.

Although a few parts of this book have been published in the journal Al-Irfan, the original book has been destroyed at the hands of the French in the incident of the burning of Allamah's library.

Al-Nusus Al-Jaliyyah Fi Al-Imamah (The Clear Texts on Imamah): This book contained authentic Hadiths from the Ahl Al-Sunnah and Shia in establishing the Imamah of the infallible Imams (a.s.). It too was destroyed in the fire.

Tanzil Al-Ayat Al-Bahirah (Revelation of the Splendid Verses): In this book, the author had extracted over a hundred verses from the noble Qur'an whose interpretation and contexts of revelation were derived from Ahl Al-Sunnah texts in order to offer evidence for the Imamah of the Imams (a.s.). This

book is also not accessible.

Falsafat Al-Mithaq Wa Al-Wilayah (The Philosophy of the Covenant and the Wilayah): In response to the request of Hajj Shaykh ‘Abbas Quli Tabrizi, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, in this book, undertook to offer an interpretation of two verses among the verses related to Wilayah and Imamah. With the assistance of the verses of the noble Qur’an and Hadiths, he has established the Imamah of the infallible Imams.

Al-Muraja’at (The Consultations): Allamah Sharaf Al-Din has presented the main issues in the subject of Imamah and the caliphate of Islamic society through proofs from Qur’anic verses, narrations, and authentic historical documents. Initially, this was in the form of correspondences that he had with the Shaykh of Al-Azhar in Egypt, Shaykh Salim Bashari, and later it was compiled into the valuable book Al-Muraja’at.

The arguments of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din in this book, particularly regarding the proof for the Imamah and successorship of Imam ‘Ali and the other Imams, is largely based on the transmitted sciences relying on verses, narrations, and authentic historical evidence. The reason for this is because these arguments of Allamah had been in response to questions that were raised by the other side, and Allamah felt that the most appropriate way, which was also in line with the inclination of the other party in the discussion, was to resort to Qur’anic verses, narrations, and authentic historical texts.

Further, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, in acceding to the request of the other party, outlined the discussion on leadership and Imamah within the domain of the religious and jurisprudential rulings separately from the general topic of Imamah. For each of these discussions, he utilized appropriate arguments.

The Qualities of the Conciliatory Perspective of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din on the Topic of Imamah

Various theories have been presented by Islamic scholars on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate of Muslim society. The Ahl Al-Sunnah scholars have presented views rebutting the Shia understanding of Imamah while providing their own particular interpretation of it. Similarly, Shia scholars have considered this topic to be of utmost importance and have numerous intellectual and transmitted proofs from the Qur’an and narrations in order to prove their own particular understanding of Imamah.

As an example, one can mention Allamah Amini’s book, Al-Ghadir. Likewise, conciliatory scholars of the Shia faith have presented their own views on the topic of Imamah with the aim of bringing together the Islamic schools of thought, which have already been alluded to. However, it seems that the conciliatory view of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din on this topic has its own distinct merits and characteristics which distinguish it from the rest of the views that have been presented on the idea of Imamah and uniting the Islamic schools of thought. A discussion and analysis of these characteristics is as follows.

1. Conviction regarding the essence of Imamah and Wilayah of the Imams

One of the unique features adding value to the conciliatory view of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din on the topic of Imamah, and which distinguishes it from the rest of the perspectives presented on this topic, is his faith and conviction in the concept of Imamah and Wilayah. In his entire academic life he did not doubt for a single moment this conviction, a fact that can be gleaned from all his works, particularly his book, Al-Muraja'at.

This feature created in him the belief that there was no enigma or problem regarding this concept except that it could be answered through academic study and research as well as further efforts in examining the intellectual and textual bases of this issue. For this reason, in response to a request for a scholarly exchange and dialogue with Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari in order to clarify the truth, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din mentioned to him the following: "Ask whatever you wish and say whatever is on your mind; the honor and precedence of making a just judgement and arbitrating between truth and falsehood is yours."20

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din reminds us in an important section of his writings that in the academic and ideological discussions of the Shias, they do not pursue nor have they pursued any goal except clarifying the truth; in line with this purpose they are prepared to make themselves available for any type of scholarly discussion or question-answering opportunity.

Likewise, he stipulates the following in another important area of his writings: "We Shias are the ones who search for that which is lost, and are of those who discuss and inquire about the truth."21

2. The essential difference between Shias and Sunnis is on the issue of Imamah

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din considered the most important point of difference within the Islamic Ummah to be the issue of Imamah. Of course, considering the interpretation that he had with regard to this concept, what he meant by Imamah had to do with all its dimensions, that of political leadership, religious and intellectual authority, and Wilayah of the Imams, and not just the outer caliphate.

The solution that he suggested to diffuse this difference was for Muslim scholars to contemplate and ponder over the proofs and sources of the Islamic schools of thought, particularly on the issue of Imamah, in order to clarify the truth. On this note, he has stated:

The greatest point of difference that has come about within the Ummah is on the issue of Imamah. Never have there been so many swords drawn for the principles and religious sources in Islam as there have been for the idea of Imamah. For this reason, the issue of Imamah is one of the greatest factors that has exasperated these differences. Many a generation has been habituated and molded with prejudice regarding this issue of Imamah, and have become accustomed to this partisanship without been conscious of it and without any thought regarding it. If each of the two groups had glimpsed at the proofs of each side from an investigative stance and not one of enmity and anger, the reality would have become clear, and the dawn of truth would have risen for those who see with true insight (and not with a

sectarian bias).22

3. Choosing an approach of dialogue and discussion

Another important feature that has contributed to the conciliatory views of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din on the issue of Imamah and Wilayah is the use of mutual dialogue and debate to discuss salient topics. Like many other theologians and Islamic scholars, by studying previous works and critiquing them, he was able to present his views in the form of personal writings without considering the antagonistic views of the time.

However, he was well aware of the fact that if he wanted to outline an effective theory on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate as well as all other essential topics of conciliation that can further assist the unity of the Ummah, then he must utilize new approaches, ones that consider the preoccupations of the opposite side as well as the contemporary circumstances of the age.

For this reason, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din was looking for an individual whose sensitivities he could appreciate and who could become his partner in dialogue. As indicated through his own testament, he had to bear much difficulty in this path, the path of pursuing the goal of conciliation and the unity of the Islamic Ummah, until he managed to find what he was looking for in Egypt.

In this regards, he says, "At the end of 1950, I went to Egypt with the hope that I would achieve my dream, that I would be able to find a way for Muslim unity and cooperation and to make use of their penmanship on this matter." In continuation, and in his memoirs with Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari (the then head of Al-Azhar in Egypt), Allamah Sharaf Al-Din recalls the following: "I poured out to him the pains of my heart and he narrated his own complaints to me."23

As is evident, such an approach carries with it particular characteristics: one of the important ones is the discovery of the knots and dead-ends of the other party to which no solution has seemingly been found. Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari clearly states this in one of his talks: "If you permit, let us delve into those deep matters and difficulties that have agitated my heart."24

For this reason, in most of his own works and in particular in his book, Al-Muraja'at, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din has considered, in his content, critique, and investigations, the conditions of the time and the preoccupations of the opposing side. It seems that one of the factors for the effectiveness of his works in clarifying the Shia school of thought and in advancing the goals of conciliation is this very approach.

Even though the approach of intra-faith dialogue existed in the past among Islamic scholars, it appears that the reason for Allamah Sharaf Al-Din utilizing it is different than the reason that others in the past have used the same approach. In general, there are two types of reasons that one can stipulate regarding the use of scholarly dialogue:

Scholarly discourses that are carried out in order to prevail and dominate over one's opponent with the

intention of destroying the intellectual and doctrinal basis of the opponent. Such is the case with the polemical debates of Nizam Al-Mulk, Ghazali, and other scholars of the Ahl Al-Sunnah vis-à-vis the Isma'ili school of thought, which were carried out with the intention of uprooting it.

Scholarly discourses and dialogues that are carried out with the hope of clarifying the truth and which is accompanied with the belief that man is instinctively attracted to the truth.25

In studying and discussing the works of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din, and in particular, his book, Al-Muraja'at, which appears in the form of a written dialogue, one can easily discover that he had no other intention but to clarify the truth, particularly with regard to the issue of Imamah and the caliphate. In fact, right from the beginning of his correspondences with Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari, he leaves the final decision with the Shaykh including deciding between truth and falsehood and whether or not to accept the conclusions.

Implicitly, he suggests that his aim is not to force his own ideology on others; rather his intention is to discover the truth and reality and to pave the way for its acceptance: "Ask whatever you wish and say whatever is on your mind; the honor and precedence of making a just judgement and arbitrating between truth and falsehood is yours."26

4. Choosing evidence from authentic sources of the Ahl Al-Sunnah

One of the important points in academic discourse is providing evidence from sources that the other party considers legitimate. Adhering to this principle carries a particular importance in academic discourses on various topics with the Ahl Al-Sunnah, especially on the topic of Imamah and the caliphate in Islam.

It is for this reason that Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari, in his seventh letter to Sharaf Al-Din requests that he should provide evidence from sources that are considered valid by the Ahl Al-Sunnah: "Present (to me) proof and evidence from the words of God and the Prophet, a proof that bears witness to your claim on the necessity of following the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.), and excuse us from not accepting the words of other than God and the Prophet."27

In his thirteenth letter as well, Shaykh Salim states, "... however, at times it can be argued that the narrations regarding the context of revelation of the above verses are Shia (interpretations) while the Ahl Al-Tasannun do not accept Shia narrators and do not use them to derive proofs. Therefore, what would the response to this be? Please answer if you may."28

It is on this basis that Allamah Sharaf Al-Din strove to take the first step in providing a well-evidenced and convincing response to the questions posed by Shaykh Salim. He also established the following: firstly, that the narrations regarding the revelation of Qur'anic verses were not limited to Shia narrators; rather narrators, who were trusted and reliable according to the Ahl Al-Sunnah, could be found in the Ahl Al-Sunnah sources, particularly in the book Ghayat Al-Maram, regarding the revelation of the same

Qur'anic verses; secondly, it is not the case that the Ahl Al-Sunnah distrust the Shia narrators; on the contrary, most of the authentic books of the Ahl Al-Sunah, such as the Sihah Al-Sittah (the Six Authentic Books), narrate from Shia narrators in many instances. On the latter point, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din enumerated almost one hundred names of such individuals to his partner in dialogue.29

In another step, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din exerted great efforts in his academic discussions to utilize authentic documents according to the Ahl Al-Sunnah such as the Six Authentic Books and other historical texts of theirs. This method and approach of Allamah, in its own way, carried beneficial results in defending the school of thought of the Ahl Al-Bayt (from false charges) and in furthering the goals of unity.

This is because by investigating, analyzing, and studying the sources of the Ahl Al-Sunnah, he was able to pursue two goals: first, accessing narrations and historical evidence that pointed to the authenticity of the claim of the Ahl Al-Bayt school of thought on the topic of Imamah; and second, by exposing the inconsistencies existing in the authentic sources of the Ahl Al-Sunnah, he forced the Ahl Al-Sunnah scholars to respond and contemplate (regarding them).

In order to ascertain the truth, he requested them to put aside subsidiary issues; in fact in his letter that he wrote to the scholarly Arab assembly in Damascus, he requested from them the following: "My request to the directors of the Assembly and to all Muslims is that they should avoid a thoughtless partisanship of their own schools of thought and they should only submit to religious evidence, that which our ancestors did during the beginning of Islam."30

Moreover, in the introduction to his book, Abu Hurayrah, he says: After offering this book, which is the result of our study and enquiry, no one should turn away or become offended. We consider thought to be great and superior to the filth of superstition and to imprisoning ourselves in a wall of a fanciful sanctity. We do not like everything to be mixed up; rather, we expect that when facing the adherent of various schools and customs, we should throw them (i.e., superstitions) afar with free thinking, and like a sage, study deeply and wisely.31

It is on the basis of this approach that in order to show that the opposition of some of the companions regarding the Imamah and successorship of Imam 'Ali (a.s.) was not (intended to be) an opposition with the religious texts, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din wrote the valuable book Nass Wa Ijtihad. In it, on numerous occasions, he alluded to how the initial companions had ended up opposing the religious texts by establishing their own personal understanding and Ijtihad as the criteria.

5. Disassociating the topic of religious and jurisprudential leadership from other discussions of Imamah

Based on the logistics of the discussion and in accordance with the request of Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari, who represented the other side of the dialogue, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din discussed the issue of

jurisprudential leadership in the Shia and Ahl Al-Sunnah schools of thought as a distinct item, distinguishing it from the discussion of Imamah in the sense of leadership of the affairs of the Muslims. For each of these issues, he reviewed and studied them with their own particular proofs and sources.

The Proofs of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din on it not being Necessary (for Shias) to Follow the Theological and Jurisprudential Schools of the Ahl Al-Sunnah

In his response to a question from Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari as to why the Shias do not follow and adhere to the Ash'ari theological school in their theology and the four jurisprudential schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) of the Ahl Al-Sunnah in their jurisprudence and laws, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din prepared and put forth a documented and convincing answer. Attention and reflection on both the manner of argumentation as well as its contents reveals many beneficial and useful points.

The Discussion of Allamah as to why the Shias Follow the School of the Ahl Al-Bayt

In response to the above question, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din pursued a logical, scholarly, and persuasive path in such a way that initially he discussed the positive aspect as to why the Shias follow the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt on the basis of evidence and proof, implying that it was an act of adhering to the Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.w.). In this regard, he states, "Our not adhering to the school of the Ash'ari in the Usul Al-Din and our not following the four jurisprudential schools in the Furu' Al-Din is not due to enmity, factionalism, or partisanship, rather, it is a religious decree that necessitates that we follow the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt of the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w.)."32

Again, he emphasizes this point when he states: It is only in submission to proofs and it is only through following the practice of the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w.), the greatest of divine prophets, that we have chosen this path. If the evidence had given us permission to oppose the Imams of the Ahl Al-Bayt of the Prophet (s.a.w.w.) or if we were able to act according to another school of thought (other than that of the Ahl Al-Bayt) in carrying out our duties, we would have gone with the majority and we would have followed in the same footsteps as them until the contract of friendship was strengthened and the latch of brotherhood became more certain; however, definite proofs blocks the way of a believer.33

From the talks of Sharaf Al-Din, one can ascertain that following; the Ahl Al-Bayt for the Shias carries two distinctions which do not exist in the Ahl Al-Sunnah school of thought.

Distinctions of the Shias in Following the Ahl Al-Bayt School of Thought

First distinction: Unified approach in extracting the principles and subsidiaries of the faith from the Ahl Al-Bayt

The unified approach of the Shias in extracting the principles and subsidiaries of the faith from the

school of the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.), not only in these two areas but also other areas such as the field of ethics and social customs and manners, is the Shias' way of following the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.).

This is done in such a way that the followers of the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt obey the infallible Imams in both the Usul Al-Din and the Furu' Al-Din as well as in the field of ethics; it is not a case where they derive the Usul Al-Din from one individual or school, follow the Furu' Al-Din from other individuals or schools of jurisprudence, and in the field of ethics emulate yet other role models.

This unified approach in deriving the Usul Al-din, Furu' Al-din, and ethical doctrines from one source plays an important role in the internal consistency and absence of inner doctrinal discrepancies. Allamah Sharaf Al-Din has implicitly alluded to this: "Rather, it is a religious proof that compels us to follow the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt of the Prophet (s.a.w.w.), compelling us to follow a school that has been nurtured within the precincts of the Prophet (s.a.w.w.), whose house was where the angels used to visit, the place where the Qur'an was revealed.

It is for this reason that we are connected to them in our Furu' Al-din, doctrinal beliefs, principles of jurisprudence and their laws, knowledge of the Sunnah and the Qur'an, and the science of ethics, manners, and customs. 34

Second distinction: Historical continuity of this school of thought

Another distinction that is latent in the Shias' following the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt, and which Sharaf Al-Din has exemplified in his writings, is the historical connection of this school with the beginning of Islam and the time of the blessed Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w.). This is such that there is no conceivable gap or historical disconnect in the adherence of the Shias in obeying the infallible Imams and the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt.

On this issue, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din has said, "However, the Shias have subscribed to the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt since the beginning of Islam (since the Ahl Al-Bayt (People of the House) are more aware of what is in the house) and the non-Shias acted according to the schools and customs of the scholarly Companions and the Tab'in (those who proceeded them)."35

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din's Explanation on why the Shias do not follow the Jurisprudential Schools of the Ahl Al-Sunnah

The second step of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din's response to Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari carried a negative aspect in the sense that he stated that the Ahl Al-Sunnah did not have any grounds for making it obligatory on Muslims to adhere to the Ash'ari doctrinal school of thought or the four schools of jurisprudence. He did this while respecting and honoring the jurisprudential leaders of the Ahl Al-Sunnah.

In this regards, he says: The majority do not have any grounds on preferring their own schools of thought over others, let alone making it mandatory to follow them. We have looked at the proofs of the Muslims with a keen and academic eye, in a scholarly manner and with complete thoroughness, and we did not find any basis for the necessity of following them, though we admit to that which has been mentioned to you: the Ijtihad, trustworthiness, justice, and high station of the leaders of the four schools of jurisprudence. However, as you know very well, this Ijtihad, trustworthiness, justice, and high station is not just limited to them. Therefore, how can it be that their schools of jurisprudence be classified as those that are mandatory to follow?"36

Motivations of the Majority in Following the Four Schools of Jurisprudence and Avoiding the School of the Ahl Al-Bayt

After having explained why the Shias follow the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.) and after stating that the majority do not have grounds for preferring or making obligatory the adherence to their schools of jurisprudence, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din goes on to explain why the Ahl Al-Sunnah follow the four jurisprudential schools and not the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt.

The main reason for the decision of the majority, according to Allamah, had to do with the political motives during the beginning of Islam. He states, "however, political expediency necessitated (that others be given precedence) and you know very well what politics called for during the early period of Islam and what happened as a result."37

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din's Critiques of the Majority Following the Four Schools of Jurisprudence

After going through the above three-fold stages in his argument and response to Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari, which prepared the grounds for a critique, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din raised some clear questions regarding the approach of the Ahl Al-Sunnah in their following the four schools of jurisprudence and staying away from the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt. These critiques are composed of the following:

First critique: reliance on common wisdom regarding the superiority of the Ahl Al-Bayt over the jurisprudential leaders of the Ahl Al-Sunnah

At the height of these arguments and talks, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din established common wisdom and narrated proofs as his criteria. Not only did he consider as unproven the preference or necessity of obeying the jurisprudential leaders of the Ahl Al-Sunnah, but on the contrary, through common wisdom and narrated proofs that supported his claim, he established the superiority of the Ahl Al-Bayt:

I can never imagine that someone would dare believe that they were superior to our Imams in knowledge or action, in other words, the belief of their superiority over the Imams, the pure family, the

arcs of salvation, the door of relief for the Ummah, the center of safety from divisiveness of the Ummah in religion, the flags of guidance, the provisions of the messenger of God and his remnants left among the Islamic Ummah.

The Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.w.) has said regarding them: 'Do not go ahead of them that you may be destroyed, do not fall short from joining them that you may perish, and do not instruct them in anything since they are more aware than you.'38

Second critique: historical criticism of the jurisprudential schools of the Ahl Al-Sunnah

In his second critique, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din challenges the historical sources of his counterpart who expressed the idea that the righteous men of the past were followers of the majority Ahl Al-Sunnah school of thought. The issue that all of the righteous men of the past in all places and all times were followers of the majority school of thought was considered as being historically baseless by Allamah Sharaf Al-Din.

Regarding this, he states: It is quite surprising that you state that the righteous men of the past were followers of this school of thought and you consider them the most just and most honored amongst all the schools of thought. It is as if you are not aware that the righteous men of the past as well as those that came after them, i.e., the Shias of the family of Muhammad (s.a.w.w.), who compose half of the Muslims in reality, were followers of the school of thought of the Imams (Ahl Al-Bayt) and the weightier remnant of the Messenger of God (i.e. the Qur'an), and they did not deviate in the least from (these two).39

Third critique: contravention (the absence of the Ahl Al-Sunnah jurisprudential schools during the first three centuries)

In his third critique regarding the majority opinion (of the necessity) to follow one of the four jurisprudential schools as well as the request of Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari for all Muslims to fall in line with one of these schools, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din raises the following point: How is it that you call all Muslims to become the followers of these jurisprudential schools while the Muslims of the first three centuries were not followers of any of these schools since they had not yet been established during that time?

He says, "Therefore, what kind of authority obliges all Muslims to act according to the stated jurisprudential schools after three centuries, and not a school of jurisprudence which was already acted upon from before? Also, what forced them to bypass the Qur'an's match and counterpart, the weighty envoys, the blood of the Prophet (s.a.w.w.), the treasury of his knowledge, the arc of salvation, the leaders, the Imams, and the door of relief for the Ummah."40

Fourth critique: methodology

In the fourth level, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din offered a critique of methodology on the approach of the Ahl Al-Sunnah regarding this topic. The absolutistic obedience of the Ahl Al-Sunnah to the four jurisprudential schools and their inviting others to follow them, has caused the doors of Ijtihad, as well as the deep study into religion and religious laws, to be shut and permanently closed.

This is despite the fact that during the first three centuries the path of Ijtihad was always open for the Muslims, and which actually resulted in the appearance of great jurisprudential schools in the Islamic world including the well-known jurisprudential schools of the Ahl Al-Sunnah.

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din says the following on this topic: What is it that has caused the doors of Ijtihad to be closed shut for the Muslims while they remained wide open for everyone during the first three centuries? Who can consciously or unconsciously convince himself of this truth and say: 'God has chosen the best of prophets and messengers in order to bring the gift of religions. He revealed the highest of celestial books with the best of wisdom and teachings to the Prophet, perfected the religion through him, completed the blessings on him, and taught him the knowledge of the past and future. And all this culminates with the companions of these four schools of jurisprudence! And he should accept this conclusion.'

Moreover, they do not give anyone the permission to go beyond that which is in accordance with their own judgement; are they the inheritors of the prophets? Or has God terminated Imamah and successorship with them, and taught them the knowledge of the past and future, and has granted them something which no one in the world has been granted? No! They were like other scholars, servants of knowledge, and inviters towards it. No inviter to knowledge ever closes the doors to the (endless) treasury of knowledge.41

In such a manner and with such a firm argument, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din invited all scholars of the Ahl Al-Sunnah to contemplate and reflect over the approach that been taken.

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din's Solution in Reconciling the Schools of Thought and in Unifying the Islamic Ummah

After having established that Shaykh Salim's request for the Shias to fall in line with one of the majority schools of thought was unwarranted and after showing how the approach of the Ahl Al-Sunnah on this matter was faced with many difficulties, Allamah Sharaf Al-Din in his response to Shaykh Salim showed how the Shaykh's avenue of creating unity of the Islamic Ummah was unpractical and would lead to a dead end.

Thereafter, he put forth his own appropriate and wise solution in order to establish brotherhood, friendship, and the unity of the Islamic Ummah: The time has now come when we must together find out

how to save the Muslims from division. In my opinion, this will not be achieved by the Shias renouncing their school of thought and following the path of the majority; nor will it be achieved by the Ahl Al-Sunnah renouncing their school of thought.42

To oblige Shias to abandon their own school of thought and not others is not a wise approach; rather such an act is adverse and unfounded, it is unpractical as has been shown from the previous talks. Instead, the harmony and unity of the Muslims will take form through an avenue where you announce the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt as being independent and consider it as one of your own schools of thought (where any Muslim can act according to it). It should be such that the followers of each of the schools of jurisprudence, the Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali, consider the Shias of the family of Muhammad (s.a.w.w.) in the same way that they consider the followers of the other schools of the Ahl Al-Sunnah.43

Conclusion

In this manner, the academic approach of Sharaf Al-Din in shedding further light upon the truth and his intellectual arguments in verifying the path of the Shias in following the school of the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.), along with the logical approach that he displayed, became the catalyst through which he positively influenced his academic counterpart, Shaykh Salim Al-Bashari, who, himself, admits, "...for this reason, your letter is very strong in providing a proof and reason for both issues (first, it not being mandatory to follow the four schools of jurisprudence and second, leaving the doors of Ijtihad to remain open for everyone) and your arguments with regards to both issues are sound and clear. Even though, we did not explicitly delve into these issues, it appears that your view is the (true) view."44

Moreover, the intellectual argument of Sharaf Al-Din and his logical solution for the unity of the Islamic Ummah became the seed and sapling which would mature years later at the hands of Shaykh Al-Azhar (Shaykh Shaltut). Years after the request of Sharaf Al-Din, he responded positively and proclaimed the legitimacy of the school of thought of the Ahl Al-Bayt (a.s.) alongside the other Islamic schools of thought, which itself was a great and effective stride in creating friendship and brotherhood amongst the Muslims.

Therefore, conciliatory activities will only reach fruition when they are accompanied with the desire for the truth and when such desire is based on composure and on scholarly and valid proofs.

Allamah Sharaf Al-Din is one of the Shia scholars who, in his approach and discussions on conciliation, seems to have 'squared the circle' so to speak, in the sense that on the one hand he emphasized conciliation, while on the other, he vigorously defended the Shia principle of Imamah in most of his books as well as his spoken and written works. It is because of this that, at times, his activities have been described as pertaining to (exclusivist) Shi'ism as opposed to conciliation.

However, in studying the works of Allamah Sharaf Al-Din and in responding to this idea that on the

surface he was trying to combine opposites, one can allude to the following: Allamah Sharaf Al-Din firmly believed in the principle of the unity of the Islamic Ummah as well as the principle of Imamah in the Islamic faith. It is precisely because of this that his conciliatory activities began first with establishing the fact that between these two Islamic principles there is no contradiction or discrepancy.

Moreover, since he considered the principle of Imamah and Wilayah of the Ahl Al-Bayt as undeniable and as being established within Islamic sources and Islamic history, in his next step, he strove to establish the movement of conciliation on the basis of seeking the (higher common) truth and employing a conciliatory approach. Moreover, he wished for the efforts of other conciliatory scholars to be based on the desire for truth and on an enlightened approach by which to revisit certain events in Islamic history.

It was in his attempt to establish this goal that he presented his valuable work, Al-Muraja'at, to the world of Islam, a work which contains both the quality of conciliation as well as the desire for truth regarding the issue of Imamah. In reality, the book, Al-Muraja'at, can be counted as a practical workshop for efforts towards reconciliation from a number of perspectives; scientific, ethical, methodological, etc., which is based on the search for truth. Certainly, this approach is one of the successful approaches and methodologies in the field of the conciliation of the Islamic schools of thought and the unity of the Islamic Ummah.

1. Shahristani, Milal Wa Nihal (Cultures and Creeds), v. 1, p. 25.
2. Mutahhari, Shahid Murtadha, Anthology of Works, v. 4, p. 841.
3. Ibid., p. 845.
4. Ibid., p. 846.
5. It would appear that in the Sunni perspective the said religious authority is more diffused and continues by way of the presiding sanctity and Wilayah of the saints, the general expertise and Basirah of the Ulama, and the collective will and Iradah of the Ummah. (Ed.]
6. Tabataba'i, Allamah Muhammad Husayn, Zuhur-e Shi'eh Dar Islam (The Appearance of the Shia in Islam), p. 17.
7. Mutahhari, v. 4, p. 847.
8. Ibid., p. 849.
9. Tabataba'i, p. 8.
10. Mutahhari, v. 4, p. 850.
11. Ibid., v. 4, p. 845.
12. Khurasani, Musahabah Wa'iz Zadeh, Journal of Haft Asman, no. 9/10, p. 18.
13. Sharaf al-Din, Allamah Abd Al-Husayn, Al-Fusul Al-Muhimmah, p. 207.
14. Khurasani, p. 20.
15. Mazandarani, Muhammad Salih, "Imamah Wa Khilafah", in Shirazi, 'Abd Al-Karim, Hambastagi-Ye Madhahib-e Islami (Unity of the Islamic Schools), p. 218.
16. Misbah-Yazdi, Allamah Muhammad Taqi, Nazariyah Siyasi-Ye Islam (Islamic Political Theory), v. 1.
17. Shaltut, Shaykh Mahmud, then leader of Al-Azhar, Egypt, "Verdict of officializing the jurisprudential school of the Shia," 1378 A.H. To access the text of the verdict, refer to Shirazi, 'Abd Al-Karim bi Àzar, Hambastagi-Ye Madhahib-e Islami (Unity of the Islamic Schools), p. 310.
18. Speech of Ustad Ja'far Subhani in Special Edition of Sharaf Al-Din, p. 6.
19. Salihi, Sayyid 'Abbas, "Allamah Sharaf Al-Din: Symbol of the Defender of the Ahl Al-Bayt and the Guardian of Unity," in Journal of Hawzah, no. 124, p. 2.
20. Sharaf Al-Din, Sayyid Musawi, Al-Muraja'at (Consultations), p. 47, letter #2.

21. Ibid., p. 56.
22. Ibid., Introduction, p. 41.
23. Ibid., p. 41.
24. Ibid., p. 46, letter #1.
25. Baghistani, Muhammad, “Sayyid Sharaf Al-Din: Enlightener of the Link between Theology and History,” in Journal of Hawzah, p. 124, p. 162.
26. Sharaf al-Din, Al-Muraja’at, p. 47, letter #2.
27. Ibid., p. 65, letter #7.
28. Ibid., p. 132, letter #13.
29. Ibid., p. 136, letter #16.
30. Sharaf Al-Din, ‘Allamah, Ila Al-Majma’ Al-Ilmi Al-’Arabi Bi Dimishq (To the Scholarly Arab Assembly in Damascus), p. 13.
31. Sharaf Al-Din, Allamah, Abu Hurayrah, p. 16.
32. Sharaf Al-Din, al-Muraja’at, p. 52, letter #4.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p. 55.
36. Ibid., p. 53.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 55
41. Ibid.
42. This echoes the famous statement of Imam Khumayn (r.a.) in which he said that, “those who wish to make Shias into Sunnis, or Sunnis into Shias, are neither.” It is also the standing policy of the present leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatullah Khamenei who said; “I do not mean to say that Shias should convert to Sunni Islam or Sunnis should convert to Shia Islam. I do not intend to say that all religions should be amalgamated into one religion. Rather, what I intend to say is that Shias and Sunnis should not make intellectual efforts only to lend credence to their own beliefs.” (http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=86... [16]) (Ed.]
43. Ibid., p. 56.
44. Ibid., p. 58, letter no. 5.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/al-taqrib/number-5-november-2009/imamah-and-wilayah-allamah-sharaf-al-dins-approach-conciliation

Links
[1] https://www.al-islam.org/user/login?destination=node/46091%23comment-form
[2] https://www.al-islam.org/user/register?destination=node/46091%23comment-form
[3] https://www.al-islam.org/person/muhammad-ishaq-dhakiri
[4] https://www.al-islam.org/organization/al-taqrib
[5] https://www.al-islam.org/library/sunni-shia
[6] https://www.al-islam.org/journals/number-5-november-2009
[7] https://www.al-islam.org/feature/introducing-ahlul-bayt

[8] https://www.al-islam.org/feature/resources-further-research
[9] https://www.al-islam.org/feature/responses-misconceptions
[10] https://www.al-islam.org/feature/shia-beliefs-explained
[11] https://www.al-islam.org/feature/unity-between-shia-sunni
[12] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/wilayah
[13] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/imamah
[14] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/islamic-unity
[15] https://www.al-islam.org/person/abdul-hussayn-sharafiddeen-al-musawi
[16]
http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=868&Itemid=12